

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MARK LAITY, NATO CIVILIAN
SPOKESMAN IN KABUL VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: NATO'S EFFORTS
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Assistant Secretary of Defense Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome Mr. Mark
Laity, the senior spokesperson for NATO in Kabul, Afghanistan. Welcome to the
Bloggers' Roundtable, sir.

Do you have an opening statement for us?

MR. LAITY: Yes, I have a short one, because I'm sure there's more
questions.

What I -- I think I would just open by saying this is, I would say, a
time of opportunity as well as challenge. We've just come out of a number of
significant events which I think can see a -- a new way of doing things, or a
development on a way of doing things. We just had the Bucharest summit of NATO
nations, which also had all of the other ISAF members. And there's 40 countries
in all.

And there was a lot more unity there than in the run-up to it, and I
think you saw a willingness by NATO nations to bury their differences and
actually try and get on with something a little bit better than they had in the
past.

And also, at the same time, you saw the U.N. come out with a
strengthened mandate and a new special representative of the secretary-general
who is being told, one, to take more of a leadership role; two, cooperate more
with ISAF.

And then finally we saw this commitment to the long term, which I think
is one of the keys to success as well as cooperating better with the Afghan
government.

So those, I think, all offer a reinvigorated strategy, because the only
way we're going to win in Afghanistan -- we're not going to win by fighting.
We're not going to score a win by development. We're not going to win by having
a government. We're going to win if all three are working together. And that's
been the problem is we're not working well enough together. So a very
challenging time.

The Taliban insurgency is contained. It's not resurgent as some people say. But it is still a potent threat. At the moment I'd say that they have -- in combat terms, they're pretty much on the back foot. But as insurgents, they can still do IEDs, they can still intimidate people, they can still do suicide bombs, they can still do a lot of damage and keep the pot boiling. But to defeat them -- it's not just enough to do it in the field; we've got to have better development, more jobs, better government, everything working together.

And I think that's the challenge for us now, and I think that's enough, because I'm sure that people have got a lot of questions, and I think that's a better way to -- to engage.

So over to you, and I'm happy to be here.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

And I'd like to remind you guys, as it comes your turn, be sure and state your full name and your publication.

So Richard, why don't we get started with you?

Q Thank you. Jack, was that to me, Richard Miller?

MR. HOLT: Yes. Yes.

Q Thank you. Yes, Mark, a question about the opium production and NATO's policy and what success you've had in terms of converting the opium trade into, say, more acceptable economic activities. I'm wondering if you could just address that topic generally. Thank you.

MR. LAITY: Sure. What I think is important, too, to make clear, NATO is not in the lead on counternarcotics, or ISAF is not in the lead either. Very specifically, we do not do eradication, full stop.

What we can do is within our means and capabilities, we can support the people who are doing it. By that, I mean, if you've got an eradication force operating in an area, and they get themselves in trouble, then it becomes a security issue, and we can help them out. But they don't eradicate.

The best way that we can help in reducing the menace of narcotics is by improving security. If you look at the figures for opium, what you're seeing, poppy growth, is you're seeing more being grown often in fewer areas, and the areas where you're reducing poppy growth, sometimes to the point where there's, I think, 13 or 14 provinces which are now poppy free, is the areas where security is best.

If we can make an area secure, then the police can get in and eradicate. And if we can make an area secure, then people can build roads, cold storage facilities, they can grow alternative crops and get them to market.

And the essential problem is not just eradicating poppy, it's what the people who are growing poppy should do. And we have an issue for instance where the farm gate price of opium is actually only about 40 percent more than that of wheat. But the trouble is is if you grow wheat, you've got to get it down the roads; you've got to market it. You've got to get people to buy it, et cetera, et cetera. If you grow poppy then the person who is your dealer buys it at the gate, so it's money in your hands without any other trouble. And what we need

to do, therefore, is create the alternative economy in which being legal is also profitable. And to do that we need better security.

And I know that people are often concerned about, well, why don't we just buy the opium? The problem there is that 4 percent of the agricultural land in Afghanistan is used for poppy; 4 percent. If we were buying poppy then, you know, it doesn't take much imagination to know what the other 96 percent will be growing the following year. So there's no simple way to answer this problem. But the way that we're contributing is to try and improve security. And where the security is the worst we tend to have the most poppy, for instance in Helmand province.

Q For a follow up question, Mark -- and I'm sorry, I didn't state my name and network affiliation, that was Richard Miller from Talk Radio News -- last question in this connection, and that is, to what extent -- or I'll put it this way -- you've indicated a little, but what is sort of the symbiosis between the Taliban and poppy? MR. LAITY: There is--there is a close and, we think, increasing linkage, in that -- first, let's start in the biggest sense both have an interest in security. So whether you are growing poppy just because you want to make money, or whether you 're a Taliban, you want one thing, and that's insecurity.

The Taliban are increasingly funded by the proceeds of poppy, often through allowing its transit, through areas they -- they are fighting over, or just taking a levy off people. So, in effect, poppy is helping fund the insurgency.

They also come in and do deals with narcotics warlords, and they will work together. Sometimes people who are growing poppy, Taliban will say, okay, we'll protect you, and they try and gain support that way.

So the symbiosis is pretty close, and it works in a number of different ways.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Rich Lowry. (No response.) Okay, Andrew.

Q Mr. Laity, Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us today.

MR. LAITY: Thank you.

Q Sir, I've got a two-part question following up on Mark's. If you have --if you need more security to reduce the poppy growing, it means you're going to need far more troops than you have now. Then why are the Marines from the 24 MEU still stuck at Kandahar between some NATO ISAF American type of political faux pas?

And a follow-up question is going to be, if you get more troops, assuming you guys use the MEU, then why not put them to start interdicting the poppy -- the opium going out of the country? You know, if you stop the choke points -- you're not going to stop the poppy growing in Afghanistan, never will. So stop -- stop the export of it, and you stop a lot of the generation of hard cash.

MR. LAITY: Okay, the -- as I said, I'm not -- I firmly believe if the areas -- if we secure an area then other people can deal with eradication. And eradication on its own is just a beginning. If you want to get rid of poppy you've got to take away the economic impulse to grow poppy. So security is important, but it's only the beginning. You need to give people an alternative to poppy.

Now in terms of numbers of troops, we have got increasing numbers of troops, and they are securing a lot of areas. So the insurgency itself is around about -- well, what we'd say is 70 percent of the incidents are in 10 percent of the districts which contain 6 percent of the population.

And if you look at the poppy growth, it's -- you know, Helmand is now massive, and where is the security the worst? It's in Helmand. So if we can grip Helmand, then we start gripping that issue.

Now with regard to dealing with the traffickers, I just have to make clear that our mandate, which is approved by nations and is determined by nations, is that we don't get involved in eradication. Now if we're finding that traffickers and Taliban are hand-in-hand, then they become a security, and we can start dealing with them. With regards to the border issue -- sorry, go on.

Q No, I was going to say, but you've got guys walking out of the country. Maybe eradication, I don't want to quibble over terms with you. I understand you're not going to send helicopters over and spray them like they did in Vietnam. But if by eradication you can also -- you know, then -- then isn't it simpler to stop the opium being walked out of the country, shoot those guys effectively, and you stop the problem or at least you stop the generation of cash that the Taliban needs.

MR. LAITY: It's not as easy -- I mean, Afghanistan is a massive country. I mean, from the bottom left to the top right it's the distance between Paris and Warsaw. The border area is -- huge. It is very mountainous. It is -- to interdict everything that's going across there requires a hell of a lot more troops than we've got. We've tended to focus on the populated areas.

What you're now seeing is you're seeing people like the Marines coming who have a -- who could be used in border areas increasingly. But we do not have the troops to hunt drug smugglers and deal with the Taliban. What you are seeing is, of course, an increasing number of police -- Afghan police and Afghan army -- and especially the Afghan army.

And they are, if you like, future, because the more Afghan troops there are, then the more we can turn to other duties, and the more that the Afghan army is there, they understand their territory better than we do, and they can often smell the bad guy, whereas frankly, you know, they're all guys in turbans to us. They're not to Afghans, and they can deal with these issues in a way that we can't.

But I think it's important -- you know, we are not allowed to do eradication. Where we can see that the drug traffickers and the Taliban are operating together and providing a security threat, then we can deal with them. But that's a political decision.

Q Okay. Well, speaking of that, can you go back -- you got the 24 MEU, you got 3,200 Marines stuck outside of Kandahar doing nothing for a month. Why are they -- you know, if you need troops --

MR. LAITY: Well, let me comment. That was an inaccurate story, I'm afraid.

Q Okay.

MR. LAITY: The -- I mean, this was a story in the Baltimore Sun --

Q Correct. MR. LAITY: -- and it was based on the comments of a -- of a Marine lieutenant colonel. Now the reporter spoke to COM ISAF a couple of days later, and he put the record straight, and I can be very specific here. I'm not arguing with the reporter, who reported what he was told I guess, but the story was wrong.

The Marines came in. There's no argument over their purpose. They're under the operational control of General Dan McNeill, an American four-star officer, who could use them as he saw fit. There was no argument within NATO about their use. He was the one who decided how to use them.

The timing of their arrival, their preparations for getting into initial operating capability and full operating capability, was decided weeks ago. They met the timetable. They're on the timetable. They're on track and on schedule. And there has been, I can say definitively, no delay of any kind, and no argument over their usage.

Q Oh, great. Okay. No, I'm hoping so because I'm embedding with them. And I postponed my trip because I didn't want to spend time at Kandahar Airport.

MR. LAITY: (Chuckles.) You know, I think -- I mean, I don't know when you're coming over, but I don't think you're going to be -- I don't think you're going to be spending too much time in the PX.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) Okay.

Q I appreciate that. If there's any sort of news release on that you could send to Mr. Holt, I'd appreciate it, because, again, all we saw was the Baltimore Sun article, which is not positive.

MR. LAITY: Right, okay. Well, I can -- if people -- you know, you've got my details, the moderator. If they send me their emails, then I can make sure that any product on the email, can be -- any stuff we've got can be sent out. But you'll be aware, rather tragically, that there was two Marines died from 24 MEU as they were moving out of Kandahar, and I think that tells you that they're on the move.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Yes, we will make those connections.

And was anybody else on the line? Somebody else join us? Okay, do we have any follow up questions there?

Q Yeah, I do, if you don't mind.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Go ahead.

MR. LAITY: Fire away. Q Yeah, with the -- sir, going back to the security equaling -- with better security that -- you're knocking out the poppies, how are the wheat sales going? How is the -- how are the alternative crops and alternative jobs coming along? How's that program in general?

MR. LAITY: I think -- I think I'd have to say it's very patchy. Where -- where the provinces are poppy free, then you can see the growth building up. And the -- you know, the roads get better, you create a kind of synergy between development such as roads, such as cold storage, which works.

And where you have strong governmental influence -- for instance, there's some places in the east -- a couple of the provinces in the east where you've had a very strong governor, a lot of aid from the U.S. who've done a fantastic job out in RC East, and a very strong policy, you've seen some pretty good results.

I think where the security is the problem is that we can't get the synergy working until we can get a better grip on the security. And as I've said, a lot of the growth is restricted to one or two areas. I'm not saying that drugs are not a problem throughout Afghanistan because the movement of drugs is a significant creator of problems and wealth -- illegal wealth. But where we're gripping the security, then you're seeing the other things starting to come in. But it's a huge problem; I don't want to understate it. It is a massive problem, and I wouldn't try and pretend that we are on top of it.

MR. HOLT: All right sir.

Well, thank you very much. And if there's no other questions here, we'll -- we'd like to thank you, sir, for joining us. Mark Laity is the senior spokesperson for NATO in Kabul, Afghanistan. Thank you for joining us for the Bloggers' Roundtable, sir, and hopefully we can speak to you again.

MR. LAITY: I'd love to. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right sir, thank you very much.

Q Thank you, sir. Appreciate the time.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. LAITY: Thank you. Bye.

END.